

NATURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

April 2006

What is Earth Day?

Earth Day, April 22, is the annual celebration of the environment and a time to assess the work still needed to protect the natural gifts of our planet. Earth Day has no central organizing force behind it though several nongovernmental organizations work to keep track of the thousands of local events in schools and parks that mark the day. Earth Day is observed around the world, although nowhere is it a national holiday. In the United States, it affirms that environmental awareness is part of the country's consciousness and that the idea of protecting the environment - once the province of a few conservationists - has moved from the extreme to the mainstream of American thought.

(<http://www.usinfo.state.gov>)

Environmental Highlights: Federal Government Actions

<http://www.earthday.gov/>

Today the federal government is cleaning the air, promoting land conservation, and improving water quality.

The Bush Administration is focused on achieving meaningful results – cleaner air and water, and healthier lands and wildlife habitats.

- The nation's air is much cleaner today than it was 35 years ago and progress will continue.
- The trend of annual loss of wetlands has been reversed.
- Restoration and redevelopment of abandoned industrial sites is accelerating.
- President Bush is meeting his commitment to reduce the National Park Service maintenance backlog.



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What is climate change?

<http://www.earthday.net/>

The term climate change refers to global changes in temperature, wind patterns, and precipitation. These changes are being driven by a gradual warming of the Earth's atmosphere (commonly referred to as global warming). The Earth's climate has been changing slowly over the centuries. Cold periods have alternated with warm periods. However, these changes have been happening at a much faster and devastating rate in recent years. The 1980s and 1990s were the warmest decades on record. Science indicates that this acceleration is due to human activity.

*"...a truly global threat."
 Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the
 UN, referring to climate change
 November 2004.*

The Earth's atmosphere traps heat escaping from the surface of the planet, which keeps us warm. Carbon dioxide, part of the mixture of gases in our atmosphere (called greenhouse gases), is very good at trapping heat. Some of the greenhouse gases are released into the atmosphere from nature every day. For example, carbon dioxide enters the atmosphere daily from decaying plant matter and forest fires.

In the past, natural processes could handle the amounts of greenhouse gases generated, and the system remained in balance. In recent decades, however, human activity through increased use of fossil fuels and cutting down of forests has been overloading the natural processes. Greenhouse gases are now being generated by the burning of fossil fuels to run cars and factories and heat buildings, as well as by industrial processes. These releases of greenhouse gases have shifted the atmosphere's natural balance.

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All documents are available at www.usembassy.fi/arc/document.htm

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For a listing of Earth Day Internet resources, please log onto
the U.S. Embassy Helsinki website at
www.usembassy.fi/arc/spotlight_earth.htm



*Earth laughs
in flowers*

*Ralph Waldo
Emerson, 1847*



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